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ABSTRACT

As students progress through the grade levels, the demands of academically rigorous subject matter combined with greater dependence on informational text make it imperative for students to attain age-appropriate reading skills, yet a visible number of less proficient readers is appearing in grades 4 through 8. Teachers can help these students by providing high-interest, relevant sources of print to serve as a point of departure for oral discussion. Teachers must also address student attitudes and motivation. Inclusion in both social and oral literacy events is critically important. In the upper grades, most children need direct instruction in reasoning and responding to text. Literature studies can be a motivational and efficient way to build independence in reading. Chapter books that reflect the learner's world will spark interest. Whatever the context, older struggling readers must have a wide range of opportunities to read. Extensive professional development and research to expand empirical evidence about appropriate instructional approaches for high-risk students groups is also recommended. (NKA)

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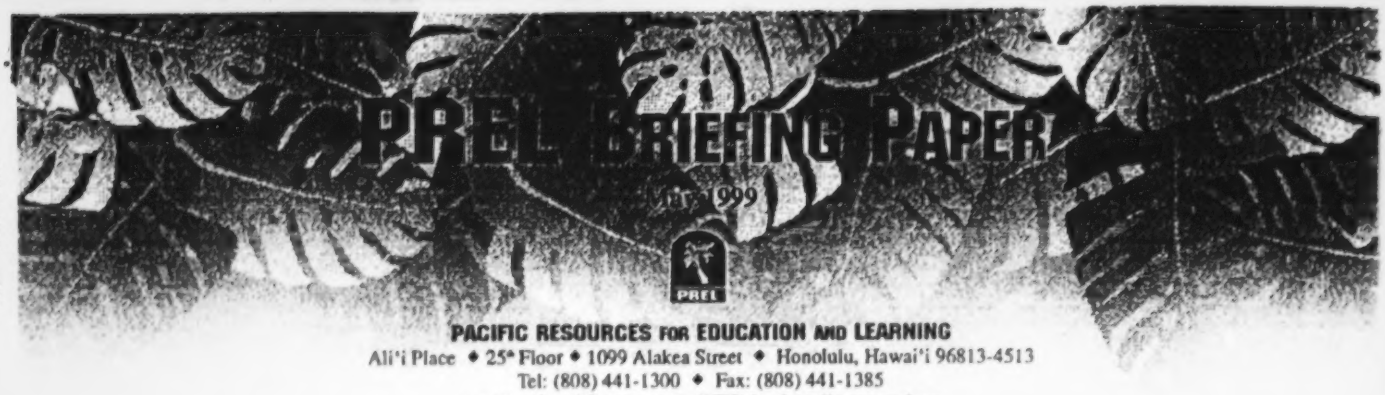

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Reading Instruction for Older Struggling Readers

By Alfredo Schifini, Ph.D.*

Across the nation, schools are undergoing a profound change in the composition of students they serve. Classrooms are experiencing a dramatic shift to a population that is highly diverse, both linguistically and culturally. Increasing numbers of students come from language and cultural groups never encountered before in U.S. schools. Declining socioeconomic levels of U.S.-born students and the arrival of newcomers with a range of educational levels have served to complicate issues of language development, literacy, and academic inclusion (Chall, Jacobs, & Baldwin, 1990). Nowhere, however, are these concerns more critically felt than among older struggling readers.

Attainment of Age-Appropriate Reading Skills Is Imperative

As students progress through the grade levels, the demands of academically rigorous subject matter combined with greater dependence on informational text make it imperative for students to attain age-appropriate reading skills. Yet increasingly, a visible number of less proficient readers is appearing in grades four through eight. Although most have a command of social English, many students experience difficulties in reading and writing academic English. In a large-scale California study, most schools surveyed reported that continuing English learners—those who speak English as a second language and have attended U.S. schools for at least four years—enter high school reading at a fifth-grade level (Minicucci & Olsen, 1992). Substantial numbers of native English speakers find themselves in a similar situation upon entering high school; this is particularly the case among minority populations. In 1994, 69 percent of African-American fourth graders scored below the "basic" reading level, while 64 percent of the Hispanic students had similar scores. Less than one-third of the Caucasian children were behind in reading in the same grade (Campbell, Donahue, Reese, & Phillips, 1996).

Possible Reasons for the High Number of Older Struggling Readers

One can only attempt to sort out the possible reasons for this alarming situation. Social scientists

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have examined societal factors that might contribute to some students' lack of literacy attainment. Some see the increasing numbers of youngsters living in poverty as a major contributing factor. Others believe that students who are transient and are exposed to inconsistent pedagogical approaches to reading as they move from school to school are more likely to struggle in reading achievement. For many, lack of a consistent, well-organized, research-based reading program—one that provides for early intervention and individual help—might be the reason behind this crisis in reading. Other factors that affect the success of struggling older readers include teacher competence and variations in school funding. For example, in California, the number of books per child in school libraries has declined from thirteen to just three in the last decade (Klein, 1999). In addition, per-pupil expenditures, teacher salaries, and class sizes differ from school to school. Teacher preparation is also a critical concern. In poorer areas where the most needy children attend school, many teachers providing reading instruction have not taken a reading methods course. Large numbers of teachers start in the profession without any pre-service training in reading, and even experienced teachers often lack adequate training to help older struggling readers. With all these factors affecting older struggling readers, how can teachers help them to improve their English reading skills?

What Teachers Can Do

Teachers can start with the classroom environment. Advertisements, brochures, bumper stickers, postcards, posters, newspapers, magazines, and other print matter should be used to provide high interest, relevant sources of print and serve as a point of departure for oral discussion. It is necessary to let go of the neatly put together traditional bulletin boards and give way to student-generated work (Atwell, 1987).

Teachers must also seriously address student attitudes and motivation. Affect—emotions, attitudes, and feelings—plays a large role in propelling students to success in reading. Particular attention to affective concerns such as student attitudes and feelings of self-efficacy must be taken into consideration.

Inclusion in both social and literacy events is critically important. Reading and writing workshops, literature discussion and participation in cooperative learning groups help to provide real reasons for students to communicate with others, share ideas, and gain confidence with books and other print materials. The grouping of students must be flexible. For example, all students might be brought to the study of a new theme presented in the language arts anthology. They should take part in pre-reading activities designed to tap and focus background knowledge and provide a purpose for reading. All students can then be brought to the text using a variety of explicit instructional approaches that foster the understanding of new vocabulary and concepts (Guthrie et al, 1996).

In the upper grades, most children need direct instruction in reasoning and responding to text. Systematic skill instruction in comprehension and word recognition may then take place utilizing several texts at the independent and instructional reading level of the students. Intervention based on specific needs, as well as small group and individualized help, should not take the place of meaningful reading and writing experiences.

Older students need a wide range of experiences with written materials. As youngsters move through the grade levels, more proficient readers enjoy many successful experiences with texts. Strugglers are stymied to reach independent reading levels. Teachers can begin to bridge the gap by reading aloud to children. Reading aloud is a vital strategy that gives children access to books that they cannot read independently (Mooney, 1990; Trelease, 1989). Authentic literature reflecting a variety of literary genres and styles provides a rich springboard to discussion and collaborative talk.

Strategic reading can be used with older readers to support their growing independence. In the context of a small-group setting, students can experience success by reading texts with the teacher—texts that pose too great of a challenge for them to read initially on their own. The teacher selects reading materials that are at the edge of the student's reading development. Essential reading strategies develop over time as teachers guide students to use semantic, syntactic, and sound-symbol information about text to gain meaning. Ultimately, students read and re-read the text on their own to develop fluency.

Students must be encouraged to read independently. Students need to apply their developing reading skills by using books that give them a reasonable degree of success. Literature studies can be a highly motivational and efficient way to build independence in reading. Students select from a wide variety of books in the classroom library. Chapter books that reflect the learner's world will spark interest. Small groups read from multiple copies of the same text. Initially, discussions will involve aesthetic reactions to the book and then move on, under the guidance of the teacher, to include literary analysis. Whatever the context, older struggling readers must have a wide range of opportunities to read.

Instruction Must Meet Children's Needs

Schools must adjust instruction to the actual needs of the children. Older children vary greatly in terms of experiential background and language proficiency, requiring teachers to be flexible in their teaching methods and to customize instruction. This is particularly critical in the area of basic skills instruction (vocabulary development, phonemic awareness, and word recognition). Care should be taken not to emphasize skill instruction based on one single viewpoint or approach. Presenting skills through a narrow scheme of instruction might not be responsive to students' myriad needs in upper grades. Although systematic and explicit skill instruction is appropriate when needed, flexibility in approach is called for. Schools must, in this case, temper skill instruction with oral language development, literary analysis, concept development, and higher-order thinking.

Conclusions

Older struggling readers are a reality in today's classrooms, and there is no simple solution to their complex needs. A broad base of reading reform is necessary. The following recommendations are only the first steps on the long road to reading success for older struggling readers.

- Extensive professional development on the mechanics of reading instruction for teachers of grades four through twelve.
- New research efforts to expand the empirical evidence about appropriate instructional approaches for high-risk groups of students such as those learning English as a second language.
- Restructuring of the textbook adoption process to encompass grades K-12 and permit the adoption of only research-based materials.
- Consistent, mandatory pre-service and in-service training of teachers, including "emergency permit" teachers, to ensure that every teacher is prepared to teach children how to read.

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